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Kent's state

UIS' Redfield is having a blast as Illinois political expert-in-chief for the national media, even if reporters aren't always listening

By R. L. Nave



Kent Redfield is happy to discuss politics whenever and wherever.
PHOTO BY R.L. NAVE

Kent Redfield has been a go-to-guru of Land of Lincoln politics since forever.

A regular on WICS Channel 20 and in the pages of the State Journal-Register and this newspaper, the emeritus political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield is frequently sought out by quote-seeking journalists outside of Springfield as well.

For example, the Columbia Journalism Review once cited Redfield's work on campaign finance reform. In 2006, he attempted to explain the paradox that was the bribe-accepting-death-penalty-opposing former Gov. George Ryan to the Lewiston (Idaho) Morning Tribune. Just as recently as October 2008, Redfield dished to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette about Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr.'s no vote on the Wall Street bailout.

So when the news broke that another Illinois governor had been arrested, again charged with soliciting bribes and that president-elect Barack Obama or members of the transition staff could be involved, everybody wanted to pick Redfield's brain.

"It has been a blur," says Redfield, who estimates having talked to approximately 100 media outlets in the first two weeks of Blagojagate.

In recent weeks, Redfield, also former director of UIS' Institute for Legislative Studies, has been quoted by the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Newsweek and Politico.com and is somewhat of a regular at drive time on radio station KCBS in San Francisco. His cell phone number is now widely distributed, and he's even given interviews while standing in line at the supermarket.

A good chunk of his time is devoted to educating reporters and providing the necessary context, although some seem to already know what they will report and just need a quote or soundbite from the obligatory expert, Redfield says.

"There's a tendency not to do the homework," he says, noting one popular misconception among non-Illinois journalists is the notion that Blagojevich, Obama and House Speaker Mike Madigan "must be thick as thieves because they're all Chicago Democrats."

Thanks to late-night and sketch-comedy programs that have caricatured our state as a cesspool of political corruption, Redfield must perform a delicate balancing act.

"That sort of thing is hard when you've worked hard on ethics stuff and campaign finance reform and you know there are good people," in government, Redfield says. "At the other end, you don't want to be an apologist for the [corruption] that's here."

More media inquiries have been made of Redfield about Blagojevich than even Obama's presidential announcement in February 2007. That, he explains, was a daylong event and at the time, Obama was considered a longshot even for the Democratic nomination.

The Blagojevich saga, on the other hand, is not likely to be finished anytime in the foreseeable future.

The Illinois House investigating the governor's impeachment must finish its work before a trial can commence in the Senate and the question of Obama's unfilled Senate seat hangs in the air.

Plus, the governor is constitutionally bound to preside over the swearing-in of the incoming state Senate, complete a budget and deliver his state of the state address. Gubernatorial and Senate candidates will begin positioning for the 2010 elections next year as well.

Nevertheless, Redfield will continue to take reporters' calls. "If this doesn't get your juices flowing, I don't know what will," he says.

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